

## Grooming the Product Backlog

By Roman Pichler

### Introduction

The product backlog is a beautifully simple artifact – a prioritized list of the outstanding work necessary to bring the product to life. To work with the product backlog effectively, it needs regular attention and care; it needs to be carefully managed, or groomed.

### The DEEP Qualities of the Product Backlog

The product backlog has four qualities in Scrum: It is **detailed** appropriately, **estimated**, **emergent**, and **prioritized**, making it DEEP. I find that particularly the first and the third property are often overlooked. Let's explore these qualities in more detail, as grooming aims to ensure that the product backlog always fulfils the four qualities.

#### *Detailed Appropriately*

The product backlog items are detailed appropriately. Higher-priority items are described in more detail than lower-priority ones; they are smaller and more precise as depicted in Figure 1. "The lower the priority, the less detail, until you can barely

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### March Event Review: "How to Get That Next PM Job" with Shreyas Doshi, Product Manager, Google

By Dan Galatin

Shreyas Doshi, Product Manager at Google, presented at the March 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the SVPMA. He described a number of actionable steps to increase your chances of landing the right product management job.

Mr. Doshi's discussion was built on three key lessons he learned from being on both sides of the hiring process: it is essential to build your credibility even before applying for a position; PM roles usually require prior experience; and job hunting makes you smarter if done correctly. He began by surveying what the role of a product manager entails, based on Marty Cagan's definition: "the product manager is responsible for discovering a product that is useful, usable, and feasible." A good product manager has "product sense," is smart, gets things done, is a culture fit, and has techni-

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# P-Camp: An SVPMA Member's Perspective

By Cindy F. Solomon

On March 13, roughly 550 product managers, product marketing managers, bloggers, vendors, sponsors, speakers and others interested in product management issues gathered for "Silicon Valley P-Camp 2010".

Held at the Yahoo Campus in Sunnyvale, this was the third annual P-Camp for Product Managers and Product Marketers. P-Camp is the world's largest get-together of product managers based loosely on the

successful Bar Camp and Open Space formats.

Preregistered participants, included thought leaders from all over the country, proposed more than 70 different session topics. Uservoice enabled collective intelligence to determine which presentations would be scheduled for the two morning sessions. Participants voted online for their favorites and commented on the subjects they were most interested in.

Starting early on a Saturday morning, we got in two 45 minute sessions before lunch. I attended Product Management in a Start-Up Environment hosted by Adam Birch and Use of Social Media for Product Marketing Research with Scott Gilbert.

In the first, we collaborated in small groups to identify the critical steps, resources and deliverables vital to a PM's ability to hit the ground running that establish credibility and momentum from day one.

In the second session, Scott encouraged a lively audience discussion of case studies and how social media is currently being implemented by PMs.

Key nuggets I took away were:

- Sources for market research data available at [business.gov](http://business.gov)
- Conversations happen with or without you
- The customer experience is that of a continuous conversation across devices, platforms and applications
- There are a lot of case studies for social media being used for product research at the front end for product innovation and at the back end for product launch strategy; but less examples are available that focus on the interim stages of new product development.

The afternoon agenda was created in a real-time Agile manner by attendees with the world's largest dot voting experience ever undertaken.

The volunteer team was quite efficient in posting the finalized schedules. During the lunch break, sponsor donated books, software, trainings and other desirable items were raffled off.

After lunch, I attended Making Web 2.0 work for product management with Andrew Filev, Product

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SVPMA is an all volunteer non-profit association for Product Managers in Silicon Valley and around the San Francisco Bay area.

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Strategy with Sue Raisty-Egami, and Agile Story Craft with Dennis Britton and Amy Lightholder.

Key highlights from this session were:

- Agile stories should be implementation-free
- Developers want to build
- Developers think that "if you didn't put it down on paper, it's not important."

Throughout the day, 34 different sessions took place. This was the kind of professional event chock-full of networking opportunities, educational insights, and information that will take some time to digest.

Session content and notes are being captured on a wiki. I was delighted to meet face-to-face the bloggers and Product Management celebrities who have been tirelessly promoting critical visibility of product management in the industry.

Thank you Silicon Valley Product Managers Association, Rich Mironov, and the 25 other volunteers who

handled all the logistics and promotion for an excellent event!

Not only did I come away with new information, I validated product ideas, and recognized how much I enjoy the challenges of product management. Look forward to seeing you next year. ☘

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# Achieving Fast, Flexible Flow

By Greg Cohen

If we consider product management in a linear fashion, our job is to:

1. understand customer pain points,
2. create insights,
3. vet those insights against potential solutions and business opportunities,
4. prioritize those opportunities,
5. work with development to build the solution, and
6. market the solution so the world, or at least the target customer, knows it exists.

More simply stated, product managers take insights and ideas and convert them into products and revenue (figure 1). All along the way, we need to build in opportunities to validate our ideas, broaden our learning, and refine our plans. Our goal is to create winning products by optimizing the sustainable flow of value to our customers and profits to our companies. But how do we best flow value?

As discussed in a previous article, queues are the enemy of responsive and flexible solution development. They hurt cycle time, quality, and efficiency. This exposes ourselves to changes in preference, competitor pre-emption, unpredictable schedules (*i.e.* delays), decreased quality due to long feedback loops, and reduced revenue.

Limiting batch size, therefore, is very important because queue size can never be less than batch size. If we want to shrink queues, we need to learn to work in smaller batches. I've already discussed how product managers can deliver PRDs incrementally in the form of minimum marketable features (MMFs) in my article on *Working in Small Batches*.

A further way to manage queues and keep batches small is to enforce WIP constraints. Thus, we limit the work in progress and monitor queues at each step in the process. If a back-up occurs, for example, at QA, the team shifts to assist QA until the back-up is cleared and flow is restored to the system. This contrasts to the traditional approach and thinking that

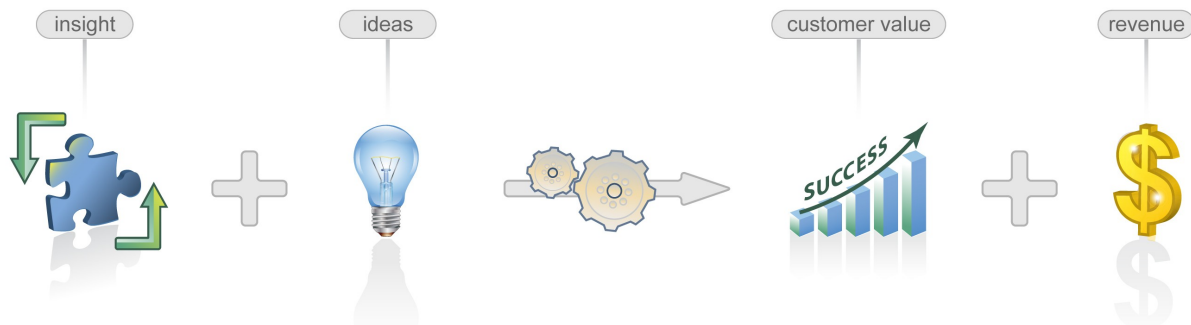


Figure 1: Product management simplified

One lean concept that has become popular is that of fast, flexible flow. Fast, flexible flow has five elements:

1. **Minimize Queues** by working in
2. **Small Batches**, managed through
3. **Work in Progress (WIP)** constraints, to
4. **Shorten cycle times**, and approach
5. **Single piece flow**

views engineering as a precious (*i.e.* expensive and scarce) resource that must be kept 100% utilized writing new code. Delaying the release of the product by creating a large backlog at testing does not create value for our customers or our companies. Rather it makes us inflexible and slow to deliver value.

As batch size shrinks and the team focuses on fewer concurrent items, cycle times decrease. If features and enhancements take less time to get through the system, for example going from months to a week,

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then tracking and status reporting are greatly simplified. Status is simple, either the feature is in progress or it's in queue. The team can even produce estimates of when an item in the queue will be worked on based on their capacity and throughput. Lastly, as features are developed serially but quickly, product management will have considerably more opportunity for feedback throughout the development process. As new learning emerges and/or opportunities emerge, the plan can be adjusted for an optimal outcome.

The final element of fast, flexible flow is the goal of single piece flow. You can think of a "piece" as a requirement or feature. Thus, the team works on one feature at a time, only works on that feature when there is proven demand (ideally orders), and delivers it quickly. The shorter the cycle time, the more practical single piece flow becomes.

However, due to the complexity and uncertainties of software and new product development, it may not make sense to truly go to single piece flow. First, it would expose us to risk that if the team became blocked on a requirement, there would not be additional requirements defined well enough on which to

work. If customer validation is required on a proposed solution or acceptance test, this could introduce a delay outside the team's control. Secondly, depending on the size of the team, it probably does not make sense for example to put eight developers on a single, small feature.

In the end, each team needs to find the right balance of WIP and Cycle Time to optimize the flow of value. Product management's role is to ensure the problem being solved is one for which there is a market and having just the right number of requirements detailed and queued up for the development team to balance flow and agility. ☘

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# April Event Review: “Who Cares? Guiding Products to Greatness” with Kimberly Wiefling of Wiefling Consulting

By Cindy F. Solomon

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, SVPMA members were treated to a presentation entitled “Who Cares? Guiding Products to Greatness” with Kimberly Wiefling of Wiefling Consulting. I was not prepared to be entertained, to learn how to ROAR with laughter, and to have things tossed out into the audience, both figuratively and literally.

Wiefling is a physicist by education, who spent 10 years at Hewlett Packard in product development program management and engineering leadership. She served as VP of Program Management at a Xerox Parc spinoff. Kimberly has helped to start, run and grow a dozen small businesses. She’s the co-founder of the Open Kilowatt Institute (OKI) and the co-chair of the SDForum Engineering Leadership Special Interest Group (EL SIG).

She currently spends about half of her time traveling in Japan facilitating leadership, innovation and execution workshops to help Japanese companies solve global problems profitably. She is the author of “Scrappy Project Management - The 12 Predictable and Avoidable Pitfalls Every Project Faces”, recently published in Japanese. Explaining Japanese companies’ appreciation of her emphatic personal style and approach, she pointed to Japanese popular culture that embraces game shows that are “wild, messy, noisy and too energetic.”

Kimberly is a walking resource regarding customer-centric project leadership, timeline risk analysis, portfolio management, risk assessment and mitigation, and all the tools necessary to develop products more predictably, which she doesn’t hesitate to share.

What is uniquely delightful is how Wiefling communicates the essential aspects of successful product management leadership – with humor and audience involvement, memorable sayings and acronyms. She doesn’t just talk about great leadership tactics, she demonstrates every communication skill from using powerful visuals, to intriguing the audience with questions designed to draw upon relevant experiences, involving the audience in small groups to interact in response to a challenge, rewarding the teams with pertinent giveaways (buttons & stretch toys), and generously sharing her own business and personal experiences.

She demonstrated techniques for effective meetings that ROAR – Roles are clear, Objectives are clarified and kept foremost in the minds of the participants throughout the event, Agendas serve as a flexible framework for the creativity of the group and are used to keep the group on track and build momentum for achieving the required results, Rules of engagement enable everyone to participate in a respectful and productive way that builds commitment to results beyond the event conclusion.

Wiefling is clearly passionate about business leadership via product and project management. She discussed the benefits of concurrent engineering and integrated product development that results in less development time, fewer engineering changes, less time to market, higher quality and worker productivity.

She identified key product engineering difficulties and dismantled the root causes of project failures. She touched on how email is the illusion of communication, and discussed the PRONG way to managing and influencing stakeholders. (Prioritize stakeholder interests, Relationship building, Open two-way feedback mechanisms, Needs and wants – know them, Goals – establish shared goals.)

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## Upcoming Events:

- June 2nd - Dan Olsen, CEO & Founder, YourVersion

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She repeatedly emphasized her essential point – recognizing who cares – who is going to use it, what are their needs, who are the stakeholders and how do they measure success. The persistent question is, “who is majoring it?” She implored product managers to be completely and unrepentantly obsessed with the customer – and to determine who the customer is in every situation.

She shared an example of a stakeholder analysis using a communication map that portrays each of the stakeholders, how they relate to other members of the team, what they need from you and what you need from them, how they could enable or hinder success, and how you will manage communication with each. This provides a helicopter view of the team relationships, dynamics, resource needs, requirements and feedback and enables you to tune into the “WIIFM” (What’s In It For Me) channel for each stakeholder.

She talked at length about managing and influencing stakeholders’ expectations for a product from the beginning by setting expectations using a one-page document. Identify what the product is AND isn’t, the definition of success, how success will be measured, who will work on it, critical success factors, assumptions, major risks and mitigation plans, relative priority of schedule, scope, budget, quality and other factors, target audience, distribution channels, roadmap of business driven milestones, rough budget and anything else that you recognize must not be left to chance.

She suggested that if you can’t fit the intent of the product on one page, then it’s probably too complicated. Create a visual indicator of the route to success that indicates progress to inspire the team.

Wiefling insists that “impossible is in the eye of the beholders”. The root cause of project failures is a failure to include the perspectives of the critical stakeholders at the appropriate times. Recognize that smart people love complicated solutions even when a simple solution would work better. Smart people learn from experience, wise people learn from the experience of others. Common sense is not common practice. Product management is a high risk profession – you have to do the right thing for your customer and product and some days you’ll be a hero, some days you’ll be a zero.

If you’re going to be a great product manager, you’d better keep your backbone intact, be prepared to be respected but not necessarily liked, and keep your resume updated! ☘

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and



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make out the backlog item,” write Schwaber and Beedle in *Agile Software Development with Scrum*. Following this guideline keeps the backlog concise and ensures that the items likely to be implemented in the next sprint are workable. As a consequence, requirements are discovered, decomposed, and refined throughout the entire project. Product discovery is hence an ongoing process in Scrum. There is no longer a product definition phase where the product functionality is determined once and for all.

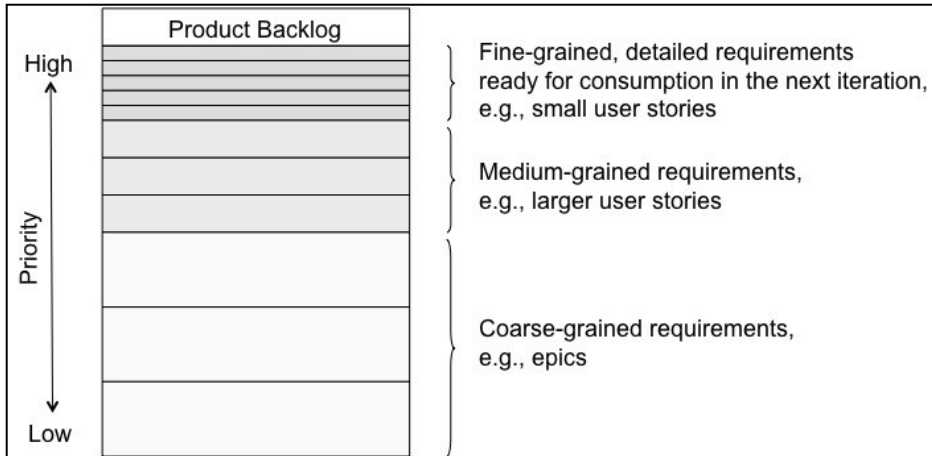


Figure 1

#### *Estimated*

The product backlog items are estimated or sized. The estimates are coarse-grained and often expressed in story points or ideal days. Knowing the size of the items is a cost indicator. It helps prioritize the product backlog and facilitates planning the release. Note that detailed task-level estimates are created in the sprint planning meeting; tasks and their estimates are captured in the sprint backlog.

#### *Emergent*

The product backlog has a very organic quality. It evolves, and its contents change frequently. New items are discovered and added to the backlog based on customer and user feedback. Existing items are modified, reprioritized, refined, or removed on an ongoing basis. The product backlog is hence a dynamic artifact that changes throughout the entire project. It is by no means fixed.

#### *Prioritized*

All items in the product backlog are prioritized. The most important and highest-priority items are implemented first. They are found at the top of the product

backlog. Once an item is done, it is removed from the product backlog. Scrum does not mandate how the product backlog is prioritized.

But I have found the following prioritization factors useful:

- **Value:** I consider an item valuable if it is necessary for bringing the product to life. If that's not the case, the item is irrelevant; it is excluded from the current release or product version. The Scrum team either de-prioritizes the item and places it right at the bottom of the product backlog or better, discards it altogether. The latter keeps the product backlog concise and the Scrum team focused. If the item is important for a future version, it will reemerge.
- **Knowledge, uncertainty, and risk:** Because risk and uncertainty influence product success, uncertain and risky items should be high-priority.

This accelerates the generation of new knowledge, drives out uncertainty, and reduces risk. If the Scrum team, for instance, is unsure about some aspects of the user interface design, the relevant design options should be explored and tested by gathering feedback from customers and users early on.

- **Releasability:** Releasing early and frequently is a great way to let the software evolve into a product that customers love. It's also an effective way to mitigate risks. If the Scrum team is uncertain about if and how a feature should be implemented, early releases can help answer this question.
- **Dependencies:** Whether we like it or not, dependencies in the product backlog are a fact. Functional requirements, for instance, often depend on other functional and even nonfunctional requirements. And if several teams work together, dependencies between them can influence the prioritization. Dependencies that cannot be removed restrict the freedom to prioritize the product backlog and influence the effort estimates; the item on which others depend has to be implemented first.

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Prioritization is imperative as it directs the team's work by focusing the team on the most important items. It also freezes the backlog contents progressively – items in the product backlog are detailed according to their priority.

### The Grooming Steps

To ensure that the product backlog is DEEP, we have to regularly groom it. Grooming the product backlog is an ongoing process that comprises the four steps listed below. These are not necessarily carried out in the order stated:

- New items are discovered and described, and existing ones are changed or removed as appropriate. A great technique to capture functional requirements on the product backlog is user stories. User stories describe functionality from a user's perspective, are easy to use and can be smoothly refined incrementally.
- The product backlog is prioritized. The most important items are now found at the top. The lower-priority items are found at the bottom. It's clear which items will participate in the next release or product version and in which order the items will be implemented.
- The high-priority items are prepared for the upcoming sprint planning meeting; they are decomposed and refined until they are ready: They are clear – the entire Scrum team has a common understanding of the items. They are feasible – small enough to fit into the next sprint so they can be transformed into a product increment according to the definition of done. And they are testable – they can be validated so that the product owner can assess if an item was successfully implemented or not at the end of the sprint.
- The team sizes product backlog items. Adding new items to the product backlog, changing existing ones, and correcting estimates make sizing necessary. Common measures of size are story points and ideal days. A great technique to facilitate team estimations is planning poker. Note that team members don't estimate the work individually. The team agrees on the likely team effort.

### Grooming is Teamwork

Although the product owner is responsible for making sure that the product backlog is in good shape, grooming is teamwork in Scrum. Items are discovered and described, prioritized, decomposed, and refined by the entire Scrum team – Scrum allocates up to 10% of the

team's availability for grooming activities (Schwaber 2007). Stakeholders are also involved as appropriate. Grooming the product backlog collaboratively creates a dialogue within the Scrum team and between the team and the stakeholders. It removes the divide between "the business" and "the techies." It eliminates wasteful handoffs, and avoids miscommunication and misalignment. Requirements are no longer handed off to the team; the team members coauthor them. This increases the clarity of the requirements, leverages the Scrum team's collective knowledge and creativity, and creates buy-in and joint ownership.

Some teams like to do a bit of grooming after their Daily Scrum. Others prefer weekly grooming sessions or a longer grooming workshop toward the end of the sprint. Grooming activities also take place in the sprint review meeting when the Scrum team and the stakeholders discuss the way forward; new backlog items are identified and old ones are removed.

### Summary

Grooming the product is an ongoing process that ensures that the product backlog is DEEP. Product owner, ScrumMaster, team should groom the backlog collaboratively involving the stakeholders as appropriate. Make sure you establish a grooming process so that the activities are carried out reliably, for instance, by starting with weekly grooming workshops. A well-groomed backlog is a prerequisite for a successful sprint planning meeting as well as for creating a successful product. Find out more about managing the product backlog in my new book [Agile Product Management with Scrum: Creating Products that Customers Love](#) (Addison-Wesley, 2010). The book dedicates a whole chapter to the subject. It also discusses the role of the product owner together with the essential product owner practices to create successful products with Scrum. ☘

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cal skills (i.e., has domain expertise and understands technology).

The presentation then went on to cover how to make each step of the job search process more successful. Popular online job boards such as LinkedIn tend to be good places to look for PM jobs. CrunchBase is a useful source of information about startups. Mr. Doshi suggests starting a blog to build credibility. There are some additional considerations for those considering a transition to product management from another role. In order to gain a realistic understanding of product management and to make sure that you will enjoy it, talk to at least eight product managers about the good and bad aspects of the role. If you're sure you want to become a PM, the best place to do so is at your current company, not at business school (although an MBA can open some doors).

Your resume should be short, real and free of buzzwords. It should focus on facts, but not go into all the details of the products you have worked on. Mr. Doshi suggests summarizing each product in three bullets: what was it, why was it special, and the key challenges you overcame. Craft the resume to provide hooks in order to pique the reader's interest and leave them wanting to learn more. Be sure to emphasize career highlights such as promotions and gaining additional responsibility.

It is increasingly common for the typical multi-round interview process to include one or more product exercises. This allows prospective employers to watch you do the job rather than just hear how you would do it. Categories of questions in PM interviews include: product-sense questions, product management basics, process-related questions, questions on previous products or projects, brain teasers or problem solving, domain expertise, and technology. It is important to be able to explain the basics of the technology the company is using, because engineers usually have a huge influence in the hiring decision. You must demonstrate profound insight when answering product-sense questions. Practice is all-important for success; for this reason, Mr. Doshi suggests, somewhat counter-intuitively, to wait before applying to a company that you absolutely love.

When you do receive offers, be sure to choose your next position carefully. Avoid situations in which the PM has no engineers to work with (i.e. isn't in charge of an actual product), the company doesn't consider engineering to be a core strength, or the company doesn't understand the role of product management (as distinct from marketing). ☞

*Dan Galatin has over 17 years combined experience in product management and software engineering. He is currently evaluating exciting new PM opportunities and can be contacted at [dgalatin@yahoo.com](mailto:dgalatin@yahoo.com).*



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Nico Peruzzi, PhD, Partner, Outsource Research Consulting has 20 years of research experience, 10 of it working with people to make their products better. He has used to conjoint analysis to help companies as large as Cisco and as small as new start-ups, B2B and B2C, across industries from software and hardware to office furniture and medical devices. Nico is steeped in statistical knowledge, but has the great ability to make these topics relevant and interesting to businesspeople who are trying to make their products better.

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